

# Stopping Friendly Fire

CAPTAIN ROBERT A. ALBINO

Fratricide may be the most demoralizing tragedy a combat unit can experience. The overall reduction in combat effectiveness is even greater than if the enemy had caused the damage. In addition to the friendly soldiers who are hurt or killed, the soldiers who pulled the triggers can be so psychologically damaged that they are ineffective for both combat and noncombat tasks.

Various manuals tell us how to avoid friendly casualties. They tell us about the importance of coordination and of always knowing where our unit and nearby friendly units are. But they tell us little about how to stop friendly fire once it has started.

Here are ten suggestions for stopping friendly fire. (These suggestions do not apply to fire from friendly aircraft or long range artillery.) Although they are intended for squads and platoons, they can be tailored for use by larger units as well. In any case, if your unit begins receiving friendly fire, decide upon the most appropriate suggestion, or combination of suggestions, and use it quickly:

**Yell.** If within earshot of the soldiers who are firing at you, yell that you are U.S. soldiers and for them to stop firing. Using profanity may add emphasis to your message, but keep the message short and simple. Yell loud enough to be heard over the gunfire. Don't worry about compromising your position. It is probably already compromised.

**Challenge Word or Password.** Although the SOI (signal operation instructions) challenge word/password combination is intended for use in a static situation before firing starts, it can

also be used to stop fire from friendly units. Shout out the challenge word of the day's combination, and this should cause the challenged unit to cease fire as the soldiers realize they are firing on a friendly unit.

**Running Password.** A running password is an effective way to prevent or stop friendly fire if the situation does not allow waiting for a challenged unit or soldier to respond with the correct password. A running password should be an easily pronounced, multi-syllable word that is not related to the operation. Furthermore, it should not be profane or alcohol-related ("Budweiser"), because such words are overused and the enemy may also use them to trick you and infiltrate your lines.

**Number Combination.** A number combination is ideally suited to operations behind enemy lines. The leader picks a number below 20 (preferably an odd number) for the day or the mission. The challenging soldier says a challenge number and the challenged friendly soldier responds with a pass number that, along with the challenge number, will add up to the number of the day or mission. For example, if the number of the day is 13 and the challenge is 5, the pass is 8.

The number chosen for the day or mission should seldom be an even number, because a challenged enemy may respond with the correct pass number by merely mimicking what he hears. For example, if the number of the day is 12 and the challenge is 6, an enemy soldier may just repeat "6" and gain access to your unit.

**Recognition Signal.** One specific purpose of a recognition signal is to

prevent or stop a friendly fire situation. There are various kinds of visual recognition signals you can use — colored smoke, flares, star clusters, strobe lights, flashlights, VS-17 panels, flags, and mirror flashes. Use one immediately.

Although primarily a control measure, as in nighttime assembly areas, your unit's assigned color can also be an improvised recognition signal. At night, place a filter this color in a flashlight and flash the friendly unit that is firing on you.

**Lift and Shift Fire.** Although using the lift and shift signal does not convey the same meaning as "Don't shoot, we're friendly," it may be effective in directing the friendly fire away from you. If your signal for lift and shift fire is a flare or star cluster, then the signal's height may make it visible to a mortar or short range artillery crew that is mistakenly firing on you.

**Surrender.** As unorthodox as this may seem, surrender efforts can work. During the resulting lull in the firefight, those who fired upon you will realize that you are also friendly, and the situation will have resolved itself.

The international signals for surrender are throwing down weapons, raising hands above heads, and presenting a white flag. Doing the first two immediately is not a good idea since they involve exposing yourself to fire before your surrender attempt is fully recognized.

White flags are not standard Army issue for obvious morale reasons, so you will have to improvise one. You can do this with a stick (or a rifle, if need be) and anything white such as a T-shirt,

handkerchief, sheet of paper, the tissue paper from an MRE (meal, ready to eat), or the inside stuffing from a first-aid bandage.

**Radio.** Using the radio has the advantage of not exposing your exact location to those who are firing at you. First, try contacting the unit that is firing on you over your higher headquarters net. In addition to directly addressing the unit firing at you, this also informs the higher headquarters of your situation. If you are unsure which unit is shooting at you, then refer to it in relation to its location, or yours: "Friendly unit at (its location), this is (your call sign). You are firing at us. Stop shooting. Over." Or "All stations this net, this is (your call sign). Whoever is shooting at us at (your location), stop. Over." If possible, refer to the locations shown on the operational graphics. Giving grid coordinates over an unsecured net is a violation of communication security, and a grid location may be difficult to plot quickly.

If you are quite certain which friendly unit is firing at you but it is not responding to you on the higher headquarters net, then use the SOI to get that unit's internal net and try to raise it that way.

Several of these first eight measures must be designated before an operation begins. (To prevent their use by the

enemy if compromised, they are not permanent.) This information must be disseminated to all U.S. and allied units operating in your area of operations or adjacent to it, and at the same time you receive their anti-fratricide measures.

If for some reason your present operation does not have the predesignated communication measure that you need to use, try the one from the previous operation. For example, if the operation order of the present mission did not include a running password or recognition signal, use the word or signal from the last mission's operation order to stop friendly fire. It may work.

**Withdraw.** If all your attempts to end the friendly fire situation through communications or recognition signals are unsuccessful, then it may be necessary to withdraw. Understandably, this may prevent or delay you from accomplishing your mission, but this is something you and your higher commander will have to consider. Use smoke and CS grenades to prevent pursuit while you withdraw.

**Cease Fire.** Returning fire is probably the worst thing you can do. Thinking that the friendly soldiers firing on you will recognize the report of your weapons is ridiculous. And shooting back risks escalating a small firefight into an outright battle that won't stop until all of you are dead.

In essence, these ten suggestions are simple. If asked, most leaders with any experience can quickly respond with at least a few of the ten. What is important is that a leader think through these ten, plus any other possible ways of stopping friendly fire, and then quickly decide upon and implement what seems to be the fastest, most effective way.

The fear, excitement, uncertainty, smoke, and noise involved in "the fog of war" complicates this thought process. U.S. casualties from recent operations prove that U.S. leaders have not completely mastered ways of stopping fratricide.

As a final suggestion, if you are a leader about to conduct a mission in dense terrain, bad weather, limited visibility, or in any uncertain enemy situation or confused friendly situation, then review the ways of stopping friendly fire. If necessary, make a list on the butt of your rifle or anywhere else that you can refer to immediately in the event of friendly fire. Or better yet, memorize and practice the list. Your soldiers deserve every protection you can offer them.

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# Property Accountability For the New Company Commander

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All too frequently, otherwise successful company commands are ruined by the most distasteful aspect of company command — property accountability.

Many "successful" commanders find out in their final days of command just how successful they have really been when they must put in a report of survey

worth thousands of dollars because of missing equipment and poor accountability procedures.

To avoid the same pitfalls, a com-